

MISSOURI CONSERVATION SHOWCASE

Missouri Ranchers Passionate About Improving Land

Rod and Blair Morris have never met a tract of land they didn't think they could improve. Since moving to Bates County, Missouri, in 1979, the Morrisses have been doing just that.



NRCS District Conservationist Diane Bradley, right, with Rod and Blair Morris on their farm in Bates County.

“When we buy a piece of land, we begin to envision what it will look like when we fix the fences, clean up the brush and re-seed the pastures,” Rod says. Sometimes the best use of the land is not for production but to be managed for wildlife. Determining this is part of the challenge.”

Rod and Blair originally accepted that challenge by buying 80 acres. Over the years, they have purchased more farms to create their 740-acre “7-0 Ranch” near Urich.

“Some of the land Rod purchased needed a lot of work,” says Diane Bradley, district conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Now it is a model ranch that is a frequent location for grazing schools, field days and tours.

“The land had been pretty much neglected. That’s why we could buy it,” Rod says.

Despite its condition, when Rod and Blair purchased the original 80 acres, Rod was on his way to fulfilling a lifelong dream.

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~ Rod Morris

“Ever since I was a kid, all I wanted to do was raise cattle,” he says. Rod got a taste of that life during his teen years in Arizona by working as a cowboy for other ranchers. Later, he quit his job as a police officer and tried raising cattle on irrigated land in Arizona. “That doesn’t work,” says Rod. He returned to his career in law enforcement for awhile, and then decided to move to Missouri, where he had an uncle.

Tough financial times for farmers and ranchers steered Rod to a job with Kansas City Power and Light, but he never gave up his dream of raising cattle. He started building his herd in 1985, and today keeps about 200 cows in his cow/calf operation.

His cattle are well cared for, and so is his land. Over the years, he has received numerous awards, including being selected Missouri State Grassland Farmer of the Year in 2001.

“He’s very conscientious of taking care of the ground,” Bradley says.

Morris says he has received advice from many people over the years, but he is particularly pleased with the assistance he has received from NRCS and the Bates County Soil and Water Conservation District. His association with Bradley began in 1993, when she worked with Morris to create a pond for erosion control and water supply.

“I thought the government came in and told you what to do. But she didn’t,” Morris says. “She asked me where I wanted the pond.”

Since then, Morris has utilized NRCS programs and state cost-share assistance to establish a number of conservation practices to benefit the land and wildlife. The Environmental Quality Assistance Program (EQIP) has helped him establish fencing and water supplies for a prescribed grazing system. He also follows a nutrient management plan and takes soil tests regularly to determine fertility. Assistance has also helped him interseed legumes into his pastures.

“Without EQIP we could not have done it,” he says. “We couldn’t have run the water lines. Without EQIP we might have four pastures on a 150-acre tract, and instead we have 11.”

Morris says he has become a believer in management intensive grazing, saying it has allowed him to double the number of cows he can keep, and has reduced the amount of hay he needs to feed.

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Morris credits management intensive grazing with also making him a better manager.

“With the intensive grazing, it makes you look at your grass and your legumes. It makes you look at what you’re going to do next week, or next month or even next year. It makes you more aware of the grass, and not just what the cattle are doing.”

He credits Bradley for helping him make the switch to the system that utilizes multiple, smaller paddocks instead of just a few, large pastures.

“Diane was the primary one who helped us get started,” he says. “It was a joint effort between what we wanted and how the federal programs could get us close to what we wanted. It always ended up being better than what we had before.”

“There’s no way that any farmer could be successful without technical assistance and intervention and advice,” adds Blair, a retired assistant school principal.

Rod and Blair have worked together to make all of their land better. They have spent many weekends camping in pastures, enjoying campfires and

getting up in the morning to fix fences, clear brush, or tend to other needs of the pastures.

“Leaving the land better than we found it is a passion for Blair and me,” Rod says. “Neither of us was fortunate enough to inherit land. We want to pass on to our children and grandchildren the land we have worked so hard for, but most importantly we want to pass on the love of the land.”

Helping People Help the Land.

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*Rod and Blair Morris appreciate
the technical and financial
assistance NRCS provides.*

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